

# TWO RIVER LIFESTYLE

## Celebrating Red Bank's Favorite Son Count Basie

By Mary Ann Bourbeau



COURTESY T. THOMAS FORTUNE FOUNDATION

Robin Blair and Gilda Rogers, vice president of the T. Thomas Fortune Foundation, helped host the recent event "A Love Letter to Count Basie: The Kid From Red Bank."



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"Basie's Groove," by Demetrius Patterson celebrates the life of William "Count" Basie, the first African American male to win a Grammy Award.

RED BANK – In honor of the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Count Basie Orchestra, the T. Thomas Fortune Cultural Center hosted a reception last week entitled, "A Love Letter to Count Basie: The Kid from Red Bank."

"We're excited about The Year of Basie," said Gilda Rogers, vice president of the T. Thomas Fortune Foundation. "We want to celebrate the life and music of Count Basie throughout the town."

Rogers is organizing a borough-wide campaign to recognize William "Count" Basie, the first African American male to win a Grammy Award (1958 and 1959). Through his music, Basie broke through racial

barriers and became a trailblazer, launching the careers of many jazz greats.

"He brought people together at a time when we were separated socially and politically," said Rogers. "His music transcends race and color. It's about love, and we need more love in our nation right now. The town needs to lift up his name. I think it's long overdue."

The Black History Month event kicked off what is being called 2020: The Year of Basie, in which businesses, organizations and services can pay tribute to Red Bank's hometown hero. Basie was born at 229 Mechanic St. in 1904. His mother paid 25 cents a lesson for him

to learn the piano. Basie actually wanted to become a drummer until he heard Long Branch resident Sonny Greer play drums. Basie thought Greer, who later rose to fame as drummer for the Duke Ellington Orchestra, was a far superior drummer, so he went back to playing piano. They later formed a duo.

As his career took off, Basie left his hometown but returned several times, first in 1938 to perform with Billie Holiday at the River Street School, just a mile from what is now the Count Basie Center for the Arts. In 1961, shortly after playing at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration, he performed at Reade's Carl-

ton Theater, the venue that now bears the name of Red Bank's most famous son. He returned for additional performances in 1974, 1979 and 1983.

The invited guests who read letters included Grammy-winning saxophonist Joe Lovano; jazz pianist Bob Baldwin; jazz singer Gary Wright; Jazz Arts Project co-founder and artistic director Joe Muccioli; Brandon J. Dirden, an actor who is currently directing August Wilson's "Radio Golf" at the Two River Theater; and Dorthaan Kirk, a major force behind WGBO Jazz 88.3 FM. Kirk is also known as Newark's First Lady of Jazz.

The letters were read between musical interludes from students from the Jazz Arts Project. Wayne Winborne, executive director of the Institute of Jazz Studies (IJS) at Rutgers University in Newark, spoke to the guests. The IJS is home to a collection of nearly 1,000 artifacts that belonged to the late jazz icon. Many of these items will be included in an exhibit at the T. Thomas Fortune Cultural Center opening Aug. 21, Count Basie's birthday.

"The event was a tremendous success," said Rogers. "One of our guest speakers was Clarence

Banks, a member of the Count Basie Orchestra for more than 30 years. He was the last person Count Basie hired himself. Overall, it was a very informative and impressive night for our audience."

The cultural center is inviting businesses, organizations and services to participate in this yearlong campaign to amplify Basie's name throughout the town. They may host an exhibit in their place of business, as the Detour Gallery will do in May when it showcases Count Basie and Billie Holiday. Schools can organize jazz groups to perform his music. Bars and restaurants can serve a drink called "Down for the Count," which is being created in Basie's honor. They can post a soon-to-be-created decal in the window showing that they are part of the celebration, and list their name on a map of places associated with the jazz musician, such as the YMCA, where Basie performed at several fundraisers.

For more information, visit [tthomasfortuneculturalcenter.org](http://tthomasfortuneculturalcenter.org).

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Jazz singer Gary Wright performed with the Jazz Arts Project at the event, which kicks off "2020: The Year of the Basie," the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Count Basie Orchestra.

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